

Hurricane damage puts further strain on rural areas in Georgia

Towns like Bartow, Ga., already were suffering before Helene lashed them with 75-mph winds. Now farmers face another effort to rebuild.

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BARTOW, Ga. — Helene’s fury brought winds upward of 75 mph to this rural agricultural area, felling oak trees, pecan orchards and tracts of pine whose roots had been loosened by a deluge of rain the day before. The trees toppled onto Bartow’s roads, farms, homes and utility lines, knocking out electricity and restricting cellular service.

The main roads are mostly clear now but thousands of fallen trees and snapped utility poles lie all over, some leaning against homes and churches. Agricultural businesses that could barely handle another loss have been damaged.

Bartow, named after the first high-ranking Georgian to die in the Civil War, was suffering even before Helene. It no longer has a working downtown, but instead a strip of shuttered businesses. It does have a gas station, a post office, a cotton gin, some warehouses and a distillery. Tracks from the Norfolk Southern railroad run through from Atlanta to Savannah. But trains don’t stop here. Passenger rail service ended more than a half century ago. The depot is now a museum dedicated to the town’s past.

Helene’s damage to Bartow is just one reflection of the storm’s larger hit to rural Georgia agriculture. According to the USDA’s most recent Census of Agriculture, in 2022, agriculture employed 323,300 people in Georgia, making it the state’s largest industry. Broiler chickens and cotton are the top two commodities.

Camp Hand, an extension cotton agronomist at the University of Georgia, described the blow to growers — particularly here in eastern Georgia — as horrible.

“They need help,” Hand said. “They don’t need it in the form of a loan. They don’t need it in the form of [federal help] that comes in two years. They need cash money today.”

Hand started paying visits to cotton growers from his home in Tifton as soon as roads cleared earlier this week. In addition to wiped-out cotton crops, hundreds of chicken houses, accommodating hundreds of chickens each, were flattened. This means hundreds of thousands of chickens can no longer be sold and will need to be killed, he said. Pecan orchards were destroyed — a long-term problem because new plantings take at least seven years to produce fruit and 10 to 15 more to be fully productive.

Anna Scheyett, a professor of social work at the University of Georgia, said Helene will have a lasting impact. When Hurricane Michael ripped through southwestern Georgia in 2018, she said, it took years for federal aid to come through.

“How do you hold out till the money comes?” she said.

Hurricane Michael caused \$2 billion in agricultural losses in Georgia. County agricultural agents are still trying to figure out the extent of damage from Helene, including damage to crops, farm buildings and homes.

“Crop losses will be significant,” said Timothy Coolong, a professor and extension specialist at the University of Georgia. “The damage to electric infrastructure and cell communications is substantial and this will have an impact on farming as well. ... We drove for two hours in Southeast Georgia today with no cell signal at all. We haven’t been able to communicate with many agents due to power outages and cell service issues.”

Ten miles north in Louisville, the Jefferson County seat, the county is distributing baby supplies and food and hosting a charging station. Water and ice are being handed out in other nearby towns, but so far not in Bartow, residents say. Utility company crews have arrived from as far as Indiana to work with the local energy cooperative to restore power. As far as getting assistance from FEMA, residents are being directed to apply via the website.

“These are generational losses,” Scheyett said. “But the spirit of these generations has always moved forward.” Indeed, three farmers in the area illustrated the perseverance the area will need to survive.

‘Like a bomb hit the house’

In certain respects, Ken Smith was luckier than his neighbors. Eighty-year-old pecan trees fell all over his home property and business, scattering thousands of pecans onto the ground, but his one-story house sustained no damage.

“The house was spared by God,” said Smith, 67, still without electricity a week later.

Except when he left to study agriculture in college, Smith has lived his life in this town in middle Georgia, home to 176 people and five churches. Smith runs the same livestock stockyard, Smith Bros. Stockyard, his father and uncles did. He’s a middleman between hog farmers and meat producers, including the Jimmy Dean plant in New Bern, Tenn. Smith is also mayor pro tem and chairman of the board of Bartow Global Methodist Church.

Smith has figured out workarounds for damage to his business, which included the lack of power and major damage to the livestock loading dock from a fallen pecan tree. But that is not the full measure of Helene's impact.

On the night of Sept. 26, one of Smith's daughters, Jackie Miester, and her family of six arrived in Bartow, heeding forecasters' predictions and evacuating from Moultrie, 164 miles to the southeast. "We were going to kind of make a family weekend of it," Smith said.

But the storm took an unexpected turn, when at about 3:30 a.m., it whipped through Bartow. "One crash sounded like a bomb hit the house," Smith said. An hour later, the property inundated with fallen trees and the driveway blocked, Smith's son-in-law Josh got a phone call. His brother had died in the storm in Moultrie when his pickup truck crashed into a tree.

The Smith family was trapped on their Bartow property. For hours, they sawed fallen trees to open a pathway out. Smith's wife, Ann, ran to the two-lane highway to wave down first responders. They helped clear the driveway and flagged the only way to get to Moultrie: Take the one open lane four miles east to Wadley, then west and south on a four-lane highway.

A few days later, Ann was able to drive to Moultrie for the funeral. As for his business, "my losses are not as big as others," Ken Smith said. Georgia Power told him power should return by Saturday at 8 p.m. "And that's tentative," he said.

'The storm came with a vengeance'

"It's bad. It's very bad," said Sam Evans, 60, who is Smith's nephew. Two miles south of Bartow town limits, Evans, a second-generation farmer, operates a 200-acre beef cattle farm as well as 600 acres of timber tracts. The land took a direct hit from the storm. Evans estimates he lost 30 percent of his timber tracts and said at least 100 trees fell on his cattle farm. The hay barn and ancillary buildings suffered serious damage; half the hay barn roof is gone. "It's a mess," Evans said. "The storm came with a vengeance."

As for the cattle, Evans doesn't think he lost any. "I have found no dead cows nor have I smelled any dead cows," he said. "Nor have I seen any buzzards."

By day, Evans is a veterinarian offering what he calls "meat-and-potatoes veterinary services." Even before Helene, he said, most residents of Bartow and nearby communities couldn't afford to call his practice unless their pet faced a life-or-death situation.

Because his clinic in nearby Sandersville lost power and Evans had no cell signal for the first few days after the storm, he had to close the practice temporarily. This probably meant farmers lost some animals that were injured by the storm, he said. By Wednesday, Evans was back at his day job and spending his evenings repairing the farm's damage. He said clients who already struggled to pay for care for their pets will have an even harder time now, since they will have to shell out money for tree removal and not pet emergencies. "They're going to have to pay someone to get the trees out of their driveways," he said.

Since the storm hit, he had to get his generator going, as his mother is in hospice and needs 24-hour care. He cleared the driveway of trees so her aides could tend to her. His hay barn roof, half of it damaged, needs replacing. "We have skylights now," he said.

"I can work 16 hours a day," he said. "There are only a certain number of people who do this type of work. I feel lucky because I have the physical ability to do it and I have the resources to do it. "

'I'm at a high stress level'

Rob Evans — a friend of but no relation to Ken Smith or Sam Evans — owns 1,500 acres of cropland and natural timber as well as the town's cotton gin. He lost most of his cotton crop. Maybe 30 percent is salvageable, he said. The crop was just about ready to defoliate and harvest. The plants should be neck high but instead are flattened to the ground.

From his own fields and the six other growers he serves in Jefferson County and neighboring Burke County, there is little cotton to gin. Between his damaged cotton crop and the limited run he anticipates at the gin, Evans estimates he will lose \$2 million.

When power is restored to Bartow, he said, "we will be ginning maybe 2,000 bales" this year instead of the usual 6,000 to 9,000.

As for his peanut crop, Evans won't know for a few weeks if it's salvageable. He worries pathogens might have ridden in with the storm and said he might lose \$2 million more if his peanut crop was damaged beyond saving.

In addition to coping with crop damage and business loss, Evans faces still another hardship. His wife, Julie, 53, was recovering from a double mastectomy at home when Helene hit and can't be transported to a hospital in Augusta to have her drain tubes removed until Monday. Roads were blocked, and her doctor's office lacked power.

"I'm at a high stress level already, trying to get through this," he said.